Women-Led Non-Governmental Organizations and Peacebuilding in Rwanda

David Mwambari

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BRIEFING

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the dynamics of women-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in peacebuilding in Rwanda. Can women successfully lead peacebuilding initiatives under the post-genocide environment that currently exists in Rwanda? How do they contribute to peacebuilding in this complex and sensitive political context? These questions and their corollaries are raised every day not only in Rwanda, but also in other post-conflict environments in Africa. This paper argues that women-led organizations have been generally successful in implementing various peacebuilding initiatives that challenge traditionally held masculine beliefs about the role of women in patriarchal societies.*

KEYWORDS: *Rwanda, women's organization, gender roles, Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe (PF/TH)*

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, it was estimated that women headed 22% of rural households in Rwanda. Less than ten years after the genocide against Tutsis, this number increased to 34% (Hogg 2010: 73). The genocide, which claimed around one million people, significantly changed

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the demographic composition of Rwanda, putting more pressure on women to take up new roles (Romeo 2005: 386; Donovan et al. 2003). This progressive increase in women's leadership roles reflected the new realities of the post-conflict period in Rwandan society during the mid- and late 1990s. Due to Rwandan gender norms that positioned men as the protectors of their families and society, most of the soldiers, killing squads, and rebels were men. Therefore, it was mostly men who died during the genocide. It is estimated that 54% of those killed during the genocide were men; the majority of them being Tutsi (Omaar and De Waal 1994). Furthermore, statistics show that the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) engaged in reprisal killings of Hutus, most of whom were men (Human Rights Watch 1996). As a result of the atrocities that directly targeted men as opposed to women for execution, who were primarily the target of genocidal rape and related forms of sexual violence, the population of women rose to 80% in some communities by 1995 (El-Bushra and Mukarubuga 1995). This demographic change has altered the way Rwandan society views labor, gender roles, generational responsibilities, and power. Rwandan women responded to the new challenges mainly by reorganizing civic groups around socioeconomic activities and creating new organizations in addition to those that already existed.

After the genocide and civil war in Rwanda in the early 1990s, both existing and new women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) began to participate actively in the reconstruction of the country. NGOs rapidly proliferated across the country (Newbury and Baldwin 2000), increasing both in number and in the diversity of their missions. Prior to the genocide, such organizations were largely concerned with rural development, social and economic support of women, and other initiatives that empowered women (Newbury and Baldwin 2000). However, after the genocide, the new initiatives that emerged included participation in justice-related matters, such as Gacaca courts, refugee resettlement, and reconciliation activities. Their scope of operation increased rapidly, and they pursued assistance and advocacy for female- and child-headed homes and renewed their focus on greater inclusion of women in policy-making processes. Most of these organizations incorporated peacebuilding initiatives as they diversified their missions.

One notable organization is Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe (PF/TH). PF/TH's members included Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa NGOs. As an ethnically mixed organization in a country divided along ethnic lines, PF/TH grew rapidly after the genocide, bringing together pregenocide women's organizations and new NGOs. PF/TH's vision and focus were reenergized by the new challenges and realities of women as the majority

population in Rwanda. For instance, PF/TH initiated a peace campaign and proposed it to member organizations as a framework for rebuilding the socioeconomic fabrics of communities. The peace campaign became popular mainly because of the diversity of membership and activities. The campaign's goals were to (1) encourage a culture of peace, (2) combat gender discrimination, and (3) promote socioeconomic reconstruction and reinforce the institutional capacity of PF/TH and its member associations (PF/TH 1998).

This paper focuses on the first goal of PF/TH's peace campaign, namely encouraging a culture of peace among rural and urban communities in post-conflict Rwanda. The paper examines the various debates on the role that PF/TH and member organizations played in promoting peace in their communities. It also examines the diversification of PF/TH's agenda in light of the effort to build a culture of peace in Rwanda. More importantly, the paper highlights key contributions that PF/TH has made and the challenges it has faced in the process of building a culture of peace among Rwandan women and the society as a whole. The paper observes that in spite of its remarkable achievements, PF/TH still has many challenges. One key problem is that PF/TH's sustainability depends on the good will of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), which has been the main post-genocide political party in Rwanda. Also, PF/TH heavily relies on external donors. These obstacles can undermine PF/TH's status as a credible and independent women's NGO and limits its ability to promote a culture of peace, which is needed to move Rwanda from negative to positive peace.

WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING

Women's organizations involved in peacebuilding around the world have increasingly gained visibility. They are diverse and carry out different kinds of work. Some are national organizations running their own programs and at the same time serving as an umbrella body for other grassroots groups. PF/TH in Rwanda, which is the main focus of this paper, is one example of a national and an umbrella organization. Others are grassroots groups that have evolved into international organizations, such as the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. There are also regional women's organizations, such as the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), and global organizations focused on women's issues, such as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). Women's organizations in Africa have been increasingly interested in peacebuilding. The importance of women's role in peacebuilding is well articulated in UN

Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). However, patriarchy and structural inequalities continue to impede women's full contribution to peacebuilding in Africa.

The peacebuilding work of Rwandan women is very much in line with the effort to promote a culture of peace in the country. According to Johan Galtung (1996: 77), "a culture of peace is not a set of peaceful, non-violent representations of a reality." Rather, "the test of the validity of a culture of peace lies in how it affects behavior in conflict" (Galtung 1996: 77). A culture of peace grows when the youth, women, and men from different backgrounds are equally active participants in dialogues and collaborate to resolve conflict. However, Keith Suter (1996: 226) points out that there is no particular formula for changing a community "based on a culture of violence into one based on a culture of peace." Thus, diverse approaches to educating societies on the values of a culture of peace is necessary.

A key feature of peacebuilding is mediation, which requires mediators that are conscious of their actions and role. According to Galtung, mediators should ask themselves: "How do they [the participants in a given dialogue] experience being in their shoes?" Also, mediators should be aware of the limitations of nonviolent action and be creative in order to transcend contradictions (Galtung 1996: 79–80). In the case of Rwanda, mediation has been an important part of the peacebuilding process. As this paper shows, PF/TH and women mediators play important roles in the Rwandan peacebuilding process, and their role in peacebuilding is important given their conventional exclusion from public issues and scholarly debates about gender. Women have often been viewed as peaceful and caring (Galtung 1996; Brock-Utne 1989). Because of their perceived inclinations toward peace, critical mass theorists tend to view an increased share of women in elected offices as good for peacebuilding (Childs and Krook 2008). Women's involvement in peacebuilding is often attributed to their maternal instinct. However, feminists tend to be critical of this because it excludes women who are not mothers and reinforces the view that women are the only ones who are supposed to provide care for their families (Hammond 2002; Ruddick 1990). From the policy domain, it has been argued that women are more likely to pursue peace because of their experiences in violent conflicts (Annan 2002). This argument is very relevant to PF/TH and Rwanda at large.

During the Rwandan genocide, women faced sexual violence (including rape) and forced isolation. In addition, many witnessed the killing of family members (Human Rights Watch 1996). Though Rwandan women were primarily victims, they also participated in

atrocities. In fact, three well-known female politicians were accused of genocide-related crimes. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko (former minister of family affairs and women's development) and Agnes Ntamabyariro (former minister of justice) have each been sentenced to life in prison. Also, former first lady Agathe Kanziga, who now lives in France, has been accused by the Rwandan government of organizing the killing of Tutsi. In 1997, there were around 5,500 women (mostly Hutu) serving sentences for acts of violence during the genocide, which amounted to around 5% of the prison population (De Keersmaeker and Peart 1997: 110). Most of the offenses committed by women related to aiding male perpetrators of the genocide, such as calling out other Tutsi women from where they were hiding, refusing to hide Tutsi women, looting Tutsi women's property, cooking for perpetrators of murder, or refusing to denounce the killings. Interestingly, all of these crimes conform to Rwandan gender roles (Adler, Loyle, and Globerman 2007; Hogg 2010; Jessee 2015). In some cases, however, women directly participated in the killings.

Despite their experiences as key victims and, to a lesser extent, perpetrators, Rwandan women have been often praised for saving lives by hiding Tutsis or helping them escape. Some such notable women include Sister Helen Nayituliki, Alice Musaniwabo, and Josephine Dusabimana. They sheltered and protected Tutsis, which defied the traditional gender norms that portray men as the protectors of the vulnerable (Mascarenhas 2014). In addition, former Premier Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, Rwanda's first female premier minister, has been praised as a hero for her opposition of President Juvénal Habyarimana's divisive politics that led to the genocide. Uwilingiyimana was one of the first leaders to be killed during the genocide by the presidential guard (Hogg 2010: 75). Since the end of the genocide, women have increasingly undertaken active public roles through political parties and NGOs. Given their experiences, disproportionate share of the population, and assumed inclinations toward peace, it is important to critically examine the involvement of women and women-led organizations in the Rwandan peacebuilding process.

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND PEACEBUILDING IN RWANDA

NGOs are often considered non-state actors whose main goal is to advance their members' interests or some universal values (Schoener 1997). NGOs are vital in all societies. In fact, there has been a huge growth in NGOs locally and internationally. The proliferation of local and international nongovernmental organizations, including

women's NGOs, in post-conflict countries is a particularly common phenomenon. The earliest women's organizations in Rwanda can be traced back to the First Republic, most of which were social centers for women at the prefecture administrative level, women's cooperatives, grassroots organizations, and church-related women's groups. The number of NGOs increased dramatically after the genocide, particularly those that were women-centered. In 1986, there were around 493 women's groups, by the mid-1990s, there were around 15,400 (Newbury and Baldwin 2000: 2). In their report on women's organizations in post-1994 Rwanda, Catherine Newbury and Hannah Baldwin (2000) attributed the increase to the weakening of government services, political liberalization, and an increase in external funding. However, less than ten registered women's organizations operate nationally. Some of the notable national-level women's organizations included PF/TH, Duterimbere, Association des Guides du Rwanda (AGR), Haguruka, Association de Solidarité des Femmes Rwandaises (ASOFERWA), Association des Veuves du Génocide Agahozo (AVEGA), and Association des Femmes Chefs de Familles (AFCF).

One notable feature of the growing NGO landscape was the diversity of their missions. One type included those formed outside the country, such as Club Mamans Sportives, which was founded in Burundi to encourage urban, middle-class women to become active in sports. Another type was national organizations, either new or existing, that were focused on post-genocide challenges of women, including ASOFERWA, AVEGA, and Association des Femmes Chefs de Familles. These three organizations emerged immediately after the genocide and grew rapidly, largely due to their new and unique focus on women's experiences. Within four years of its creation in 1995, AVEGA, whose mission was to assist widows, had over ten thousand members and drew substantial aid from international donors. Equally, ASOFERWA attracted a large membership and enjoyed generous donor support. By 1999, ASOFERWA had over forty employees and offered counseling for youth suspects in prison, psychosocial support, and the group even built a model village in Ntarama that was supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refuges and other donors (Burnet 2008: 20). PF/TH was founded in 1992 when thirteen women's NGOs came together to form an umbrella organization. PF/TH's membership grew from the original thirteen to thirty-five in 1996 and fifty-eight by 2013 (Insight on Conflict 2013). PF/TH was the first major organization to bring together urban and rural women, including women who returned with the RPF, Hutu and Tutsi survivors of the genocide, and female refugees from camps in the Congo and other neighboring countries.

Women's organizations anchored their programs on peacebuilding, which was generously supported by outside donors, such as the United States Agency for International Aid (USAID)'s Women in Transition (WIT) program and the UNHCR's Rwanda Women's Initiative (RWI) (Newbury and Baldwin 2000: 2). As the largest umbrella body, which was well established even before the genocide, PF/TH and its members were among those privileged to receive donor funding. PF/TH developed a clear campaign aimed at inculcating a culture of peace targeting both rural and urban women.

The Rwandan government and NGOs were among the first to embrace UN resolution 1325 (2000), which emphasized the role of women in peacebuilding, security, and conflict prevention. Inspired by the resolution, PF/TH partnered with Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) and the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) to develop the National Action Plan (2009–12). Internally, PF/TH's work focused on initiating programs that encouraged the creation of a culture of peace and empowering women to be proactive peace builders. Some of their activities included training women to participate in national policies on governance, assisting returning refugees, actively participating in local Gacaca courts, helping genocide survivors, and promoting Rwandan women's participation in the advancement of peace internationally (Newbury and Baldwin 2000: 5). PF/TH's peace campaign confronted old and new challenges to creating a culture of peace in Rwanda, of which the first was the ongoing mission to combat patriarchal norms of violence and discrimination against women. The second challenge was addressing the social issues women faced as a result of their unique experiences during the genocide (Mageza–Barthel 2015).

Patriarchy has been a major barrier for women in Rwanda because patriarchal norms are entrenched in every aspect of society. Popular Rwandan proverbs often instill a gendered division of labor and stereotypes that condone violence against women, including the following: "the hen does not crow with the cock," "in a home where a woman speaks, there is discord," and "a woman's only wealth is a man." Though Rwanda has traditionally been a patriarchal society, it should also be noted there are some traditions that carve out notable roles for women (Hogg 2010). For example, it is widely known that women are traditionally key advisers to their husbands, which often happens discretely (Newbury and Baldwin 2000).

The second challenge relates to women's experiences of the genocide. Pre-genocide Rwandan gender norms translated into the normalization of violence against women and influenced how both Hutu and Tutsi women experienced the genocide. In their expected protection roles,

men led the killing groups and engaged in sexual violence as a weapon of war. The male killers targeted Tutsi women for rape and other forms of sexual violence intended to prevent them from giving birth to more Tutsis. One notable problem that has resulted from the rape crimes have been unwanted children. Under Rwanda's patriarchal traditions, children are identified by their father's lineage, which means that women have had to endure the fact that their children will be called names associating them with their father's identity and crime, such as *enfants non-desirés* (children of hate, unwanted children) and *enfants mauvais souvenir* (children of bad memories) (Hogg 2010: 40).

PF/TH'S INITIATIVES: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

PF/TH's work in the pre- and post-genocide period is very important for understanding peacebuilding and gender issues in Rwanda. Overall, PF/TH has made a significant impact on peacebuilding and gender issues. However, there are some challenges facing PF/TH and other women's NGOs in promoting peace and female empowerment in Rwanda.

Successes

PF/TH's contributions to peacebuilding in Rwanda can be grouped into three areas: innovative programs to promote women's participation in the justice sector, fighting gender-based violence (GBV), and reintegration and dialogue programs. One of PF/TH's most significant contributions to creating a culture of peace has been its involvement in the Gacaca courts. After the genocide, every sector of Rwanda was in need of urgent reconstruction. However, there was a particular need to prioritize the justice system, which could establish legal mechanisms to address past crimes and confront new conflicts through dialogue and the courts. Ironically, only a handful of lawyers and judges were available to handle the huge volume of cases related to the genocide, not to mention everyday crimes. In 1998, for example, there were around thirteen thousand genocide suspects in prison (Clark 2010). The Gacaca courts emerged due to this conundrum. The Gacaca court system, which is an ancient justice mechanism in Rwanda, was reinvented as an alternative way to fast track some of the cases related to the genocide. Nearly 1.9 million cases were resolved in over twelve thousand Gacaca courts (Clark 2010).

Prior to the genocide, *Inyangamugayo* were men of integrity, entrusted with the process of resolving conflicts through indigenous approaches. They played roles akin to what William Zartman (1999: 1)

termed the giving of an "African conflict medicine." Essentially, they are the traditional members of the Gacaca system. Though women were historically excluded from being *Inyangamugayo*, PF/TH carved out a role for them by training women of integrity to participate as equal partners with men in the Gacaca courts. Often, women were in the majority in cell-level Gacaca courts (Karekezi, Nshimiyimana, and Mutamba 2004). Women were also allowed to participate as *Abunzi*, which are mediators charged with resolving community conflicts after the Gacaca courts had formally closed. Women's participation as *Inyangamugayo* and *Abunzi* gave them a permanent place in resolving community-based conflicts and everyday crimes (Clark 2010: 153). In addition, PF/TH trained around 318 community leaders to promote Gacaca courts and encourage men and women to participate in their proceedings (PF/TH 1998: 7).

One of the outcomes of women's participation in the Gacaca courts has been the erosion of traditional taboos associated with women speaking and being heard in public. Francine, a sector level *Inyangamugayo* in the Musanze district, stated that, "Gacaca has allowed many women to speak publicly for the first time. They have spoken the truth clearly and talked openly about their personal experiences" (quoted in Clark 2010: 153). She further explained that Gacaca courts had given women courage, especially those who had husbands in jail. These women provide for their families, they are trodden down, but Gacaca gives them strength. Arguably, women's public performance in the Gacaca courts has changed Rwandan society. As Francine further noted, "Normally, in Rwanda women are apologetic but now (at Gacaca) they are watching their men say sorry for their crimes, sometimes even apologizing directly to women they wronged, and women have found this empowering" (quoted in Clark 2010: 153). Some of the crimes that were handled in the Gacaca courts included rape. PF/TH and its members played a leading role in supporting the women who gave such testimonies and lobbied the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to prosecute gender-based crimes during the genocide (Mageza-Barthel 2015: 82). This was a significant contribution not only to the process of Gacaca courts, but also to empowering women.

Another success was in the area of fighting against gender-based violence. Most of the PF/TH's work on gender-based violence was spearheaded by two of its affiliates: Solidarité pour l'Epanouissement des Veuves et des Orphelins visant le Travail et l' Auto Promotion (SEVOTA) and Haguruka. SEVOTA was founded in October 1994 to deal with the aftermath of the genocide with a focus on rebuilding "human relationships that were destroyed in the genocide" (PF/TH

1998), and SEVOTA was instrumental in the creation of the law passed in September 1998 recognizing rape as a genocidal act and a crime against humanity (Mageza-Barthel 2015: 82).

Through its member organizations, PF/TH (1998: 7) assisted over 3,308 returning refugees and offered counseling to former commandants, complementing services offered by the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) (Tobie and Masabo 2012). PF/TH also organized a local dialogue session that brought together returning refugees and those who welcomed them. The organization set up thirty-six dialogue groups countrywide and trained around sixty-two men and 397 women to resolve conflicts through dialogue (Tobie and Masabo 2012). In addition, UMUSEKE, another PF/TH affiliate, set up similar dialogue clubs targeting youth in schools. By 2012, UMUSEKE had reached over 1,046 students (553 girls and 493 boys) (Tobie and Masabo 2012). As noted by International Alert, "Sessions focus on techniques and ground rules for dialogue, such as active listening techniques or recognizing the subjectivity of one's opinions, as well as on issues of concern for community members, such as the justice element of reconciliation and the economic situation. While this component of the project was less specific than the psychological or economic elements in its objectives, it seems to have been highly valued by the beneficiaries, and was often cited as extremely helpful" (quoted in Tobie and Masabo 2012: 10).

In general, PF/TH has made some significant contributions to the participation of women in national issues. The organization actively campaigned in support of a provision to give women at least 30% representation in decision-making organs under the 2003 constitution and successfully lobbied for the creation of a ministry for women affairs (PF/TH 1998: 7). PF/TH has been a key ally of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion. Together they have established an active Gender Monitoring Office (GMO) and lobbied parliament to implement female-friendly policies.

Challenges

Despite its achievements, PF/TH faces challenges that impact its effort to create a better environment for women-led NGOs, which emanate, in particular, from the sensitive political environment, over-reliance on external funding, and internal leadership issues. The first challenge, relating to the general political atmosphere for NGOs under the post-genocide government, is not unique to PF/TH. After the genocide, the RPF introduced a transition rule, which was extended in 1998

for another five years before elections. The political process is tightly controlled, resulting in a greater consolidation of power by the RPF, although it gave the illusion of power sharing with other pre-genocide political parties (Longman 2006). As Paul Gready (2010: 7) notes, "the government employs various strategies of management and control in relation to NGOs." For example, legislation passed in April 2001 gave government agents control over the finances and projects of all NGOs in Rwanda (Gready 2010: 5), causing the country to increasingly become an authoritarian state that does not tolerate opposition parties or independent NGOs (Straus and Waldorf 2011; Prunier 2009; Jessee 2015). The political environment is even more challenging for NGOs focused on human rights and gender issues, such as PF/TH. To negotiate this sensitive political environment, PF/TH has taken a pragmatic approach, "working with the state" rather than "resisting the state" (Gretchen and Britton 2006: 26). As a result, PF/TH's peace campaign has been dependent on the RPF's goodwill. In many ways, PF/TH has been coopted into the government's own peace agenda.

The second challenge facing PF/TH is an overreliance on external donors, which is also not unique to the organization. Shortly after the genocide, many international organizations started shifting attention to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in DRC, where millions of Hutu refugees were residing. Even though significant humanitarian aid was provided to Rwanda, most of the money was spent on the refugee camps in DRC (Eriksson et al. 1996). Early in the emergency period, organizations such as PF/TH that were taking care of survivors inside Rwanda lacked sufficient funding for their projects (Eriksson et al. 1996). However, with the forceful closure of refugee camps in DRC by the RPF, millions of dollars started to flow into Rwanda, with women's organizations being particularly favored by donors. One major source of donor funding was the USAID Women in Transition (WIT) program, which invested over US$3 million, mostly in the form of small grants to women's organizations, including PF/TH member organizations (Newbury and Baldwin 2000).

A final challenge for PF/TH relates to the leadership of the organization. PF/TH benefited from the visionary leadership of its founders, especially its founding director, Venerande Nzambazamariya, who died in 2000 in a plane crash (UN 2001). After Venerande's death, the organization has struggled with leadership issues. The RPF sought to control PF/TH, which was seen as the most important women's organization in Rwanda (Burnet 2008: 20). Consequently PF/TH's leadership positions have mostly been given to women deemed credible by the government.

CONCLUSION

Engaging women in peacebuilding is not necessarily a panacea for peace and stability, particularly in post-genocide Rwanda, where women are confronted with patriarchy and genocide. However, women's organizations are vital actors in the effort to promote a culture of peace and empower women. These organizations, such as PF/TH, face the challenge of dismantling the patriarchal behaviors that condone violence against women, but also must confront new challenges emanating from women's unique experiences during and after the genocide. Women are confronting each of these problems within a political environment in Rwanda that is becoming authoritarian. Women's NGOs that work in fragile democracies, especially after conflict, need to create new methods of dealing with politicians that do not allow them to be coopted into political agendas that do not fit their vision. PF/TH, thus, shows the contributions and the challenges of female-led organizations in Rwanda.

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David Mwambari (dmwambari@usiu.ac.ke) is assistant professor of International Relations at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, United States International University-Africa (Nairobi) and an adjunct faculty at The African Leadership Centre (ALC) in the Faculty of Social Science & Public Policy at King's College London. His research interests include youth, memory, internally displaced persons, and indigenous peacebuilding in post-war countries.